

Coping in a culture of perpetual crisis

Eight countries in Asia have shut down their chicken industries and seven people are dead from the latest avian flu. It's a scenario eerily familiar to many people in the region.

At the height of the SARS crisis last year, many office workers refused to turn up. Misinformation was rife and the mood was one of panic.

Liz Lawson, director of channels and partner alliances for networking company Cisco Systems Asia Pacific, found at short notice that a 600-head conference of delegates from the US and Europe had been pulled.

Using technology, Lawson's team instead put together a video delivery of the program, webcast over Yahoo!, transmitting to 12 countries in the region.

The insights gleaned from watching her multicultural team grapple with the SARS chaos led her to commission a two-day crisis role-play workshop by Bali-based Australian consultants Tirian.

Having experienced the fallout from the Bali nightclub bombings, along with SARS, earthquakes and potential terrorism threats, Tirian directors Andrew and Gaia Grant created Catch Me If You Dare, a crisis simulation tool, to add to their cross-cultural and executive leadership programs.

Participants were assigned to one of 12 organisations, divided among four confederations, each fictional but simulating

An Australian company is helping businesses in Asia learn how to deal with a crisis. As **Bill Pheasant** discovers, it's now being put to the test.

real-world political, corporate and humanitarian agencies.

A sudden health crisis emerges with limited time for a solution. As the clock ticks, 17 weeks are crammed into five hours, complete with media spin, networking savvy, politicking and brinkmanship.

Clients of Tirian have included regional branches of multinational firms, such as law firm Baker & McKenzie, Goldman Sachs, Newmont Mining and GlaxoSmithKline.

Lawson's team in Singapore — the biggest player in the \$US2 billion (\$2.6 billion) regional market — has eight nationalities, with different religions, values and cultures, working with clients in 14 countries from China and India to New Zealand and the Philippines.

"A lot of the work with Tirian has been around 'How do we remove these barriers — imagined or real — and how do we create an environment where everyone can work as a team?'," Lawson says.

"This [Catch Me If You Dare] was about how a team operates under a stressful environment and how critical the human elements are to ensure you achieve your aims and reach a united conclusion."

Tirian began with leadership training for

the hospitality industry, including for the acclaimed Four Seasons Resort in Bali.

Christopher Norton, regional vice-president and general manager for Four Season Asia Pacific, says Tirian's program for the top 11 executives helps identify personality types and how to work with different approaches.

"The resort moved into the best years that it had. It was a very solid team, and Tirian really helped us to understand its dynamics," Norton says.

Nora Manuf is Standard Chartered Bank's team coach for human resources managers in Malaysia.

As a charity fund-raiser to fund corneal transplants, Manuf arranged a two-day conference with 60 HR managers. During lunch on the second day, terrorists invaded the Shangri La Hotel and delegates were ushered out, many leaving unfinished meals.

"We didn't tell them it was going to happen," Manuf says. "The recap at the end, that was where we made our point. That risk management is about being surprised and being able to respond and react well in that kind of situation, so we had them on board at the end."

Standard Chartered has met other real crises well. Its offices in the twin towers in

New York were destroyed in the 2001 attacks and a back-up site was operating within 48 hours. Closer to home, there have been both SARS and the Bali bombings.

Tirian director Gaia Grant says the niche market for the company in South-East Asia — there are offices in Bali, Singapore and Hong Kong — emerged because "we understand cultural differences".

"So many people who grow up in Asia are used to accepting whatever information they are given. They are not used to being challenged, or asking critical questions and learning for themselves," she says.

Earlier this month, managing director Andrew Grant ran a program in Oman with an oil company with a large proportion of Chinese staff. Cultural conflicts in the liberal Muslim nation are also emerging.

A team from multinational Biersdorf — owner of Nivea and Handyplast brands — asked Tirian to run a program in Nepal for a group of executive women from Bangkok "who didn't own a pair of flat heeled shoes".

"They had a highly driven German boss who was a marathon runner. He wanted to be pushed and wanted to push his team, and we really had to work him through the program as well," Gaia Grant explains. "For these women, walking up two flights of stairs was a challenge. He [the boss] was frustrated, and a lot of our work was debriefing him and discussing cultural issues."